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DEBUSSY

A STUDY IN MODERN MUSIC

BY

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PRELIMINARY—BIOGRAPHICAL—METHODS, AND THEIR APPRECIATION—THE COMPOSITIONS—THE COMPOSER AS A CRITIC—CONCLUSION.

A LIST OF DEBUSSY'S COMPOSITIONS.

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TO

HENRY J. WOOD

TO WHOSE BROAD-MINDED ENTHUSIASM BRITISH APPRECIATION OF ALL THAT IS MOST PROGRESSIVE IN MUSICAL ART IS SO GREATLY INDEBTED.

DEBUSSY.

IT is a truth to which the whole course of its history has borne ample testimony, that in Music, as in the other arts, there is nothing final. And there are few things in connection with Music which are more curious, or, indeed, so curious, as the vigour with which this self-evident fact has always been contested. What the world at any time has known of Music has ever seemed the limit beyond which nothing more was possible. Only the exceptional man has ever been able to surmise the existence of a further horizon, and he has always been accounted a more or less dangerous revolutionary. Monteverde, Rameau, Gluck, all came in for denunciation as destroyers of the fair fabric of musical art. The perfect Mozart, even, did not wholly escape reproach for what were deemed unsatisfactory innovations. Some of Beethoven's music earned for him the opinion that he ought to be in an asylum.

And in the same way has the wordy strife, always more vehement than discriminating, travelled on through the musical history of the nineteenth century, with Wag-

ner, Berlioz, Schumann, Liszt, Brahms, like the names of so many battle-fields on a map; battle-fields where the needless belligerents have happily long since shaken hands. Yesterday the centre of discussion was Richard Strauss. To-day it is Claude Achille Debussy.

It is convenient, even if it is an incomplete definition of his altogether novel attitude towards music, to describe Debussy as an impressionist. He is something more than an impressionist as the term is commonly understood, although in his work there is not a little which recalls the methods and the points of view of the masters of impressionist painting. Debussy, however, differs from, quite as much, if not more, than he resembles the impressionist painters, as regards his attitude towards the general body of his art.

To examine all these points of difference and agreement would involve a formidable digression. Let it suffice that while, like the impressionist painters, he desires to see things as they really are —*en plein air*—which means, in his case, freed from the trammels of certain conventional ways of regarding certain things, he does not, like his impressionist brethren of the brush, affirm that the methods of his

forerunners were essentially false, and in need of complete reversal. On the contrary, he has arrived at the methods which suit his peculiar needs, only by way of a complete knowledge of the methods which have the sanction of tradition; neither, as it would appear, has he ever laid claim to be the apostle of a new faith, outside of which there shall be no artistic salvation.

Debussy has been freely styled a revolutionary; but his has been a revolution of that kind which a contemporary French critic has cleverly defined as "evolution made apparent." It has been laid to his charge that his forms and harmonies are alike vague and incoherent. There is, however, a conceivable stage in the mastery of form—it has been witnessed already in music—which may be so complete that form, in the sense of limit or restriction, disappears. Such, indeed, does the so-called "formlessness" of Debussy reveal itself as one studies his music.

OF the outward life of Debussy there is, thus far, not much to relate. He was born in 1862, at St Germain-en-Laye. Sent to the Paris Conservatoire at an early age, he had a career there which was perhaps less immediately brilliant than solidly meritorious. A pupil of Marmontel for piano, of Lavignac for harmony, and of Massenet and Guiraud for counterpoint and composition, he won prizes in all his classes. In 1877, he had a second prize for piano playing; a first prize for accompanying, in 1880; and in 1882, an accessory prize for counterpoint and fugue. Two years later he rounded off his student career with the coveted *Prix de Rome*, his diploma work being the cantata *L'Enfant Prodigue*, a work, fortunately for his success in an academic competition, which has little suggestion of his later style.

It is a condition of the tenure of the famous scholarship which sends the pick of French art students to residence and study at the Villa Medici in Rome, that works in proof of their continued diligence should periodically be sent home to Paris. These

works, in the nature of things, occupy, as one would imagine, a somewhat delicate position. They are not prescribed exercises on given themes, for the student who has won his place in the *Ecole de Rome* has sufficiently demonstrated his right to be liberated from the restrictions of direct pupilage. But on the other hand, while these works are thus the outcome of a free initiative, they are subject to a strict and authoritative official criticism, which may or may not carry with it weighty consequences for the future of the artist.

In his experiences with this official criticism, voiced by the principal French composers of the day, Debussy was scarcely fortunate. The first composition sent home by him was his symphonic suite, *Printemps*. This received unfavourable comment on account of its want of defined form and design. A year later, Debussy forwarded his "lyrical poem" for female voices and orchestra, *La Damoiselle Elue*, a setting of a French version of Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel." Again the critical tribunal of the Beaux Arts fell foul of the composition for its vagueness. This time their censure was directed principally at the libretto, the indefiniteness of the music being pardoned, to a certain extent, as the more or less

logical sequence of a text which was itself obscure. At the same time, however, the young composer was reminded that this vagueness of expression to which he seemed addicted had already been made matter of objection. Both works, it may be added, were refused the customary public performance.

The term of his Roman scholarship elapsed, Debussy returned to Paris, betaking himself shortly afterwards, however, to Russia, where he occupied himself in giving lessons to some wealthy young Russians. In Rome he had studied the music of the composers of the Russian School, and more particularly that of the extremist Moussorgski, a composer whom Debussy resembles, if in no other respect, at least in his impatience of the restrictions of conventional musical methods. Moussorgski, and perhaps to an even greater extent the Russian folk - music which he now had an opportunity of hearing, with so much in its texture which is alien to Western European musical ideas, may be reckoned as influences which had some share in re-inforcing Debussy's natural tendencies.

Returning to Paris, Debussy busied himself with composition, although apparently without attracting much attention

until 1893, when the Société Nationale de Musique gave a performance of his censured student-work *La Damoiselle Elue*. In the same year the Ysaye Quartet played his String Quartet, while about this time, also, the orchestral *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune* was launched upon the world. This last, which remains Debussy's perhaps most generally known work, was produced by the Société Nationale in December, 1894, and repeated at a Colonne concert in the following October.

Important as these events were for Debussy, they nevertheless earned for him at best but little beyond the honours of a *succès d'estime*, nor can the triumphs of his other compositions appearing at or about this period, works like the *Suite Bergamasque*, for piano; the Nocturnes, for orchestra; or such vocal works as the *Proses Lyriques*, or the *Chansons de Bilitis*, be reasonably described as at all considerable. For the general public Debussy was a *symphoniste* of a rather eccentric kind, and the path of the *symphoniste* in Paris, which is not too easy even under the present improved order of things, was more difficult in those days.

The production of *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique, in April, 1902, however, placed Debussy's claims upon public atten-

tion at once on a very different footing. Despite the modern cultivated taste for other forms of music, the Frenchman thinks instinctively of music in terms of opera. His judgments may err, and cases are by no means wanting in which a Parisian audience has heard the better and preferred the worse, but even the mistakes of a Parisian opera audience are based upon experience and some sort of reasoned understanding of the principles of the art. Press and people alike settle down to the consideration of a new opera with a critical zest such as is reserved almost entirely for opera alone.

In *Pelléas et Mélisande* the Parisian public was confronted with something which was unusual to the point of audacity. The conventions traditional in opera had all been abandoned, while the methods of Wagner were equally ignored. Briefly, the drama proceeds freely in an atmosphere of music which really facilitates its action, intensifying the effect of every significant point, translating into sound the vague, curious, permeating sentiment of the play. Nothing is sacrificed to musical effect, and yet in no opera is there a more vital union between drama and music; in no other opera is the music more truly and essentially the ultimate and complete expression of the dramatic text.

Of course there were protests, lay and professional, on all sides. There was too much that was daringly unusual in the opera that it should be reasonable to expect anything at the outset but protests. By degrees, however, and even with rapidity, the merits and beauties of the work established themselves. It came to be recognised, and in no great space of time, that given Maeterlinck, Debussy was his logical musical complement.

Apart from the obvious suitability of the play as a subject for musical treatment by Debussy, it is curious to reflect how greatly the composer was indebted to the libretto for his success. Merit as a libretto apart, Maeterlinck's play, although it had then been barely ten years before the public, was already almost a classic. Had Debussy, however, written similar music to a kindred libretto, no matter how good, which had yet to make its appeal to public favour, or which, after the fashion of the average libretto, possessed little, if any, qualification for making such an appeal at all, *Pelléas et Mélisande* would probably have failed with a swiftness and completeness which would have left no opportunity for any demonstration of the real merits of the music. As it

was, the delicate, elusive musical fancy to which the composer had given much of the thought and labour of some thirteen years, succeeded. Henceforth, for good or ill, as the individual judgment might opine, Debussy was a musical personality such as all his previous works put together had not made him.

The years which have elapsed since the production of *Pelléas et Mélisande* have seen the publication of the orchestral *La Mer*, and of a number of songs and piano pieces, of which something more anon. For the rest, it may perhaps suffice to say that M. Debussy is content, and indeed prefers, to a degree which has not been common among composers, to live behind his compositions.

"MUSICIANS will only listen to music written by clever experts, they never turn their attention to that which is inscribed in Nature. It would profit them more to watch a sunrise than to listen to a performance of the Pastoral Symphony." The quotation is from one of Debussy's critical articles, and it would be difficult to find a more complete crystallisation of what the world takes to be his own creed as a composer than is supplied in the second sentence. *It would profit them more to watch a sunrise than to listen to a performance of the Pastoral Symphony.*

The sentiment is not new, for the man who wrote the Pastoral Symphony entertained much the same feeling. Debussy's understanding of it, however, differs from that of Beethoven nearly as much as a Manet differs from a Morland. It was an innovation for Beethoven to project a series of poetical impressions of landscape in the form of a symphony, but his task was made easier, and certainly the general acceptance of his symphony was rendered easier, by his employment of devices which had most of them already become fairly conventional,

and more or less commonly associated with the sense in which Beethoven designed that they should be understood. The genius lay in the extended use of these devices as the foundation of highly organised movements, the absolute daring with which he trusted for his effect to their constant repetition, with that attendant lulling monotony which is of the very essence of Nature.

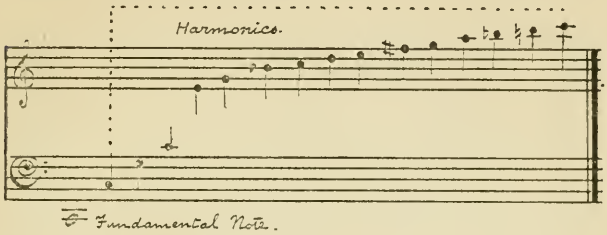
Beethoven, when he wrote the Pastoral Symphony, was more concerned with a sunrise, or at any rate with the woods and fields he loved, than with what other composers had done before him, but he arrived at his beautiful effects by way of skilfully employed conventionalisms, transformed by the power of his genius, it is true, but still conventionalisms, of subject and device. Debussy, on the other hand, is not in the least conventional, either in subject or device, and to those who are accustomed to look at things through the spectacles of conventionality, his choice of subjects, and above all, his novelty of procedure, are apt to be not a little bewildering.

A good deal has been written about the novelty of the tonality and harmony of Debussy's music. These have been refer-

red to as an elaborate re-consideration of the existing tonal system, or denounced out of hand as the aberrations of a musical Anarchist, as the writer has happened to be sympathetic or the reverse. The truth, it is to be imagined, as commonly happens with artistic disputes, does not rest entirely with either party. The harmonies which look, and it must be admitted, often sound so strange at the outset, prove, on a closer examination, to be not nearly so anarchic as one might suppose. Similarly, it is at least doubtful if Debussy started upon his more characteristic compositions with any very clearly-defined ideas as to the insufficiency of existing musical resources. One is constantly slipping into comparisons with painting, when treating of Debussy, although such comparisons are not nearly so exact, as they are convenient; but it may be said that Debussy has only the same tones to deal with as are at the disposal of the most hide-bound pedant who ever wrote an anthem; just as Whistler had only the same pigments as were used by the most reactionary R. A. of his time. With both Whistler and Debussy, it is not the material, but its

utilization which is new, and the musician, like the painter, has come upon his novel methods largely by intuition. "True composers," as Sir Hubert Parry, in his *Art of Music*, says of Wagner, "very rarely work up to a theory consciously, in the act of production; but they may afterwards try to justify anything very much out of the common on some broad principles in which they believe."

But, premising that it is practically certain that Debussy has arrived at his novel methods largely by intuition, achieving his effects first, and then, later on, possibly proceeding to the analysis of their causes, these methods and effects can nevertheless be referred to the general influence of certain factors. Of these the first may be described as a more than usually developed sense of the harmonic constitution of tone, with a corresponding disposition to employ the natural harmonic series of intervals more freely than hitherto in chord-building. As anyone with the most elementary acquaintance with the phenomena of sound is aware, all tones are composite in their nature, any given note being accompanied by a series of Overtones, or Harmonics, as, for instance:—



Without entering into an essentially technical subject, it will be sufficient to say that whereas it has taken centuries to reconcile the ear to intervals up to the major and minor sevenths, it would appear to be the opinion of Debussy that the notes of the harmonic series, having a natural relationship amongst themselves, are proportionately to be freely employed in combination. Wagner has a happy phrase, somewhere, about the "illimitable cultivability of the ear." The process of cultivation has been in progress for centuries, and while Debussy's music admittedly represents a sudden and extensive increase in what is required of the ear, it cannot fairly be said that this advance, a leap forward though it be, is other than in the line of the general trend of musical development.

Another, and intimately related factor in the constitution of Debussy's music is that the swarm of vaguely defined and freely em-

ployed harmonies to be found in his compositions obscure the sense of major and minor. The orthodox practice in musical composition is, where a rather indeterminate, or more or less dissonant combination of tones is in question, to proceed to it from the vantage point of a more certain and sure combination—one more completely satisfying to the ear—and then to pass onwards to another of a kindred stability and suavity to the first. Technically, this is the preparation and resolution of a discord; the transition from a point of rest to one of unrest, and thence to a new point of rest, which is one of the great underlying principles of musical art.

Concords, and discords, and the systematisation of tones into scales, are all inextricably mixed up together, and Debussy's departure from what has hitherto been the ordered procedure in relation to chords has involved a proportionate departure, or nearly so, as regards scales. This, again, it is possible to consider as an addition to, rather than a destruction of the proved resources of music. The universal employment of the major and minor modes exclusively, was born of expedience. They made for elasticity and security; but at the same

time the door was thereby closed upon the old Church modes, and with them, upon a range of effects which belonged to these old-world modes alone. Many of these effects Debussy has revived, but in this only treading more continuously in a path which has been adventured upon by various composers, from Beethoven to Weingartner.

Not the construction of music, however, but its effect, is the main subject of consideration so far as the non-professional public is concerned. In this connection there are a few points which it will be worth while to consider with some little attention, for upon this consideration will it depend very much whether one takes a reasonable view, or the reverse, of Debussy's music. and the reverse, it should be mentioned, may equally well be laudatory or hostile; adulation or detraction alike insufficiently informed.

In the first place it is to be borne in mind that Debussy's music overrides a good many established theories, or rather the limitations within which the operation of these theories has hitherto been confined. For the general ear this will have its most obvious and immediate effect in a certain strangeness,

something inconclusive, at times seemingly dissonant. These will be the points of disagreement, easily outweighed, however, by beauty requiring no comment. But to return to the points of disagreement, or of less ready comprehension. In regard to no art is there such a seemingly infallible sense of right and wrong as in music. The eye tolerates a figure badly drawn to the point of absurdity, but the ear shrinks, as by instinct, from what it esteems a discord, or rather, remains in a state of suspense pending the resolution into a concord—something satisfying and conclusive, the craving for which seems no less ingrained in our nature.

All this, however, is no more than a matter of deep-seated habit. Sounds are dissonant or the reverse merely because we have been brought up to consider them such. In Nature there are no discords, and the odd thing is that the ear, which is so sensitive to an infraction of a purely artificial arrangement of tones, is quite alive to this absence of discord among sounds which cannot in any way be brought within the scope of the organised scale. Natural sounds, the noises of Nature, the sound of the wind, of the sea, of the rustling of the trees, the voices of birds, sheep, cattle, even

the noises of machinery, when heard singly, or in any kind of combination, are only in the very rarest cases otherwise than in some sort of agreement, which may not be harmony in the accepted sense, but is certainly harmonious.

Debussy has sought to introduce this natural freedom of tone into his methods of composition, just as he has frequently devoted himself to the portrayal of those natural phenomena which are most immediately musical in their suggestion. The wind among trees, or rain falling on the varied leaf surfaces of a garden, produce a distinctly musical effect, but it would be only the baldest conventionalism which would assign to it any definite tonality. Debussy, in his reproduction of some such subject, deliberately aims at an ambiguous tonality which shall come as near to Nature as possible. Again, what the unaccustomed ear may regard as a dissonance, has been employed by Debussy, not from any perverse love of the ugly, for he probably loves the ugly as little as anyone else, but because he has learned to regard this seeming dissonance as a scintillating mass of tone, to be used because it fits into his scheme, just as some blot of vivid colour may be the accent, the something which

gives to a picture its vitality and point. Debussy's music thus requires for its right appreciation a catholicity of sentiment sufficient for the recognition of the fact that, because a thing is strange, it does not necessarily follow that it is false.

DEBUSSY'S music does not lend itself well to any process of analysis. It has little regularity of form, and the musician who looks for the accustomed clues and guide-posts of more or less formal composition will be grievously disappointed. Neither is it programme music in the sense of being the vague reflection of some clearly-defined non-musical idea, as in the Symphonic Poems of Liszt, for example. On the contrary, Debussy's programme indications, where such exist at all, are, if anything, rather more vague than the music which they accompany. This, indeed, is much as it should be. In art there is no such thing as an even approximately exact duplication of agencies. Sculpture, painting, poetry, and music, are all incapable of any real interchange of their respective utilities. The mission of an art is to express just that particular idea, sentiment, or feeling which it would be impossible for any other art to express. It is in doing this that an art justifies its existence. It may be quite interesting to hear how a composer will reproduce in tones the sentiment, or the

outstanding characteristics of a "programme," as in, say, Liszt's *Les Préludes.* The inspiring motive here is the following quotation from Lamartine's *Meditations Poétiques* :—

> "Is this life of ours anything but a series of preludes to that unknown song of which death intones the first note? Love forms the aurora of all existence; but what life is there in which the first transports of happiness are not interrupted by some storm whose deadly breath dispels the most beautiful illusions, whose thunderbolt consumes the altar; and what soul is there which, emerging cruelly wounded from one of these tempests, does not seek to soften the recollections of it in the sweet calm of a life in the fields. Nevertheless, man scarcely resigns himself for long to the beneficent influence which at first charms his whole nature, and when "the trumpet sounds the call to arms," he flies to the perilous post assigned to him in war, whatever it be, in order to find again in the conflict his own full consciousness, and the entire possession of his forces."

As has been said, it is interesting to hear how a composer will reproduce the characteristics of his chosen "programme," and the result, as in *Les Préludes*, may be beautiful. But the thing has been expressed already. Even in an English translation, Lamartine's lines convey not only his meaning, such as it is, but also, and quite sufficiently, that vague, elusive suggestion, that "atmosphere," which

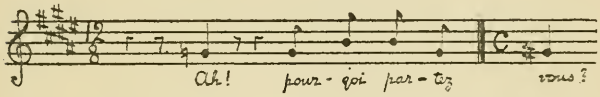
belongs to that no-man's land where is the meeting place of the boundaries of Music and of all the other arts. Liszt's music, after all, does no more than repeat what has been said already.

Now, Mendelssohn said, and very pertinently, a great many years ago:—"It is exactly at that moment when language is unable to voice the expression of the soul that the vocation of music opens to us; if all that passes in us were capable of expression in words I should write no more music." Mendelssohn would probably have held up his hands in horror at Debussy's music; which, however, proves nothing, save that it is very easy for musicians to misunderstand one another. But as regards the oft-debated "meaning" of music, at least, Debussy and the admirable precisian who wrote *St Paul* are in agreement. Debussy seeks only to express in music what cannot be expressed otherwise. He deals in non-musical motives and suggestions just as freely as any writer of programme-music, but with a difference. So far as one can classify Debussy's use of a "programme" at all, it is necessary to return to the comparison with painting, and style it impressionism. "Suggestion," perhaps,

would be a better word. There is no laboured building-up of a combination of details, suggestive, and even imitative. Instead, there is something swift, vague, and elusive, but strangely vivid and satisfying. The effect is attained, as one feels, by a kind of intuition, which goes straight to the point, by way of recognised methods, or, more frequently, in spite of them. But the broad, impressionistic methods are not taken to avoid difficulties of definition. They are adopted because definite methods are known intimately, have been judged, and, for the full accomplishment of the purpose immediately in hand, found wanting. Any reasonably competent draughtsman can fill a drawing, to the point of intricacy, with exactly correct detail. To carry out the reverse process of omission, to a like extent, takes something of a genius.

It is in the works of larger dimensions, naturally, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and the orchestral compositions, that any form of analysis is most at a loss. In *Pélleas et Mélisande*, the only possible clue to the music is in the text, and without the support of the text, the music collapses—lovely, shimmering, and insubstantial, like some gossamer tissue. It has been said, quite

truly, that there is no melody in *Pélleas et Mélisande*, and, just as truly, that it is all melody together. Nothing could well be less akin to melody in the conventional sense of the term than this :—



but what more poignantly beautiful expression of the personality of Mélisande, and of the particular situation, could be imagined? The phrase, if phrase it can be called, so childish and helpless in its suggestion, is simplicity itself, but it is the simplicity which belongs to inspiration.

In the orchestral works one finds what a shadowy, evanescent thing a "programme" is, as Debussy uuderstands it. Take the Nocturnes, published in 1890. There are three of them, with the titles *Nuages*, *Fêtes*, *Sirènes*. How they are meant to impress people, or how they impress the composer, it is rather difficult to know which, Debussy himself has indicated in the following notes:

"*Nuages*.—The unchanging aspect of the sky, and the slow, solemn movement of the clouds dissolving in grey tints lightly touched with white."

"*Fêtes*.—The restless dancing rhythm of the atmosphere interspersed with sudden flashes of light. There is also an incidental procession (a

dazzling imaginary vision) passing through and mingling with the aerial revelry; but the background of uninterrupted festival is persistent with its blending of music, and luminous dust participating in the universal rhythm of all things."

"*Sirènes.*—The sea and its perpetual rhythm, and then amid waves silvered by moonbeams is heard the laughter and mysterious song of passing sirens."

It is possible to detach themes from these movements, but of themselves they convey little. It is the work as a whole, the subtle, elusive presentation, or rather suggestion of themes, the filmy, iridescent instrumentation; it is only from the general impression of these things in combination that the sense of the music becomes clear. *Nuages* and *Sirènes* are sufficiently direct and obvious pictures; *Fêtes* is not quite so easy of explanation. Despite its splendour of massed colour, and its processional effect, one imagines it to belong to the same insubstantial regions as its companion pieces. It may be that it has as its basis of suggestion, the splendour of sunset.

Of a like nature to the foregoing is the inspiring motive of Debussy's best-known orchestral work the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune.* Based upon Stèphane Mallarmé's strange poem, Debussy's musical

fancy does little more than flit about the text, with its gorgeous imagery and colour, and it would be impossible to say where the composer's concern with the day-dreams of Mallarmé's Faun, drowsing in a grove, in the afternoon heat, ends, and his own personal imaginings begin. As in the Nocturnes, design, in the sense of outline and definition, is replaced by masses of colour, exquisite in tint and proportion, but absolutely evading any fragmentary suggestion of their charm. The three movements for orchestra, grouped under the title *La Mer*, are just as incapable of being made to render up the secret of their charm. In the sub-titles *De l'aube à midi sur la mer; Jeux de vagues; Dialogue du vent et de la mer*, there is the same sketchiness of indication, followed by an even greater freedom in the musical treatment than before.

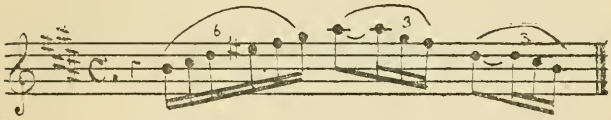
The songs and piano pieces, naturally, give one a closer view of Debussy's art. The orchestral music, the Quartet, or *Pelléas et Mélisande* can scarcely, any of them, be heard otherwise than infrequently, and even then under conditions more or less of distraction. But a piano piece, for instance, can be studied at leisure; its harmonies readily examined; the relation-

ship between the theme and the movement as a whole more or less readily detected. And another fact which will probably be discovered early is this: that even when confined within the most convenient dimensions, the mystery of Debussy's art still remains largely unexplored.

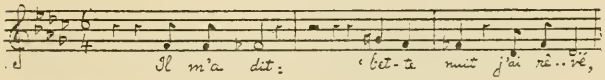
In no form of modern musical art has there been such high achievement as in the Song. Those who have a fancy to do so, may call the modern Art-Song strained and over-elaborated. Perhaps it is. Certainly it has only occasionally the spontaneous, lyric outburst of Schubert, but the incalculable element of genius apart, the Song has shown a greater and more independent advance in mastership, in recent years, than can be laid to the credit of any other musical form. In support of this one need only mention Richard Strauss, Max Reger, and Hugo Wolf. These German writers, however, have their peers in France, and high among the French song-writers stands Debussy.

To treat in detail of every song Debussy has written would be a somewhat lengthy task, although an interesting one by reason of their unflagging freshness of device. Instead, it will suffice to describe, and not too elaborately, a few representative

examples. The three *Chansons de Bilitis* which were published in 1895, are settings of verses taken from a volume of lyrics of the same name, by Pierre Louys. Bilitis is an imaginary poetess whom her creator represents to have been a contemporary of Sappho. The first of Debussy's Bilitis songs, *La Flûte de Pan*, is a true pastoral, to which an added sylvan effect has been given by the use of the Lydian scale, a tonal succession which may be most conveniently understood by imagining the scale of F major with the B natural instead of flat. In Debussy's song the effect is arrived at thus :—



In a different vein is the next song, *La Chevelure*, the narration of a dream. It is less melody than declamation, but a declamation which is instinct with the ordinarily unnoticed music of unfettered speech. Nothing could be further away from conventional recitative than this :—



It is speech, which begins calmly, rises

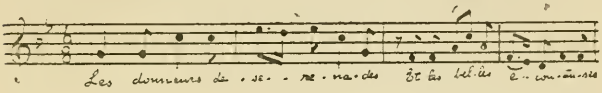
freely and suddenly into a passionate outburst, and then falls once more into calm. The third song, *Le Tombeau des Naiades*, worthily completes the book. It is a little masterpiece of suggestion. There is the peculiar emptiness of a snow-swept landscape; the numbing cold; and:—

Les satyres sont morts.
Les satyres et les nymphes aussi.

Pitiless winter has driven the gay sylvan folk before it, with the blossoms and the leaves.

Far removed in time, place, and sentiment, from the songs of the classic Bilitis, who is described as having lived in the mountains west of Pamphylia, are the two rondels of Charles, Duke of Orleans, included in the *Trois Chansons de France*. In the first of these, *Le temps a laissié son manteau*, one is carried at a breath into a far-distant century, the piano has become harp-like in its effect, and the song moves with a quaint, stiff gracefulness. Through the very art of the composer, it is no longer Debussy who speaks, but the fifteenth-century French prince, to whom Robert Louis Stevenson devoted one of his "Familiar Studies." Of a like graceful, penetrating realization of the very essence of the text are the songs grouped as

Fêtes Galantes, and the popular *Mandoline*:—



Not a detail has escaped observation, and due record subordinated with the utmost art to the general scheme.

What has been said of the songs holds not less true of the piano pieces. Like nearly everything which Debussy has written, they strike upon the ear with an unfamiliar accent. But even a slight study reveals how their governing motive, first and last, is a passionate desire for truth; for truth to the subject, truth to the manner of impression to which it gives rise in the imagination of the observing composer. The truth, for the artist, be his medium what it may, lies in the sincere impression which anything produces upon him, tested, of course, by a process of competent and fearless self-criticism. For this rigid truth, however, there is too commonly substituted whatever is supposed to be the conventional way of regarding any given circumstance. For all immediate purposes, it does just as well as the truth, it is much more readily dealt with, and as a marketable commodity its superiority is unquestionable. Thus a novelist gives his book a happy ending,

not because he feels that it is the logical conclusion, but because he understands that happy endings are approved by the average reader, and that they help the sale of a book.

There is none of this in Debussy's music. The subjects he chooses are beautiful, but what he strives for, and strives for with a certain remorselessness, is the essential *truth* of their beauty. A conventional approximation to the truth is not sufficient, and in order to get at the real thing, no sacrifice of the conventional is accounted too great. It is this sentiment which has led Debussy to the writing of music which at a first hearing sounds so strange, but which on a further study becomes fascinating, and then convincing. There is a wonderful freshness, and directness of touch in the piano pieces. Many of the more professedly pictorial pieces have the effect of sketches still wet from the brush. In all there is a masterly *élan* and distinction.

It would be difficult to imagine anything more boldly happy in effect, for instance, than the series of pieces entitled *Estampes*. The first of the series, *Pagodes*, as it begins, strikes upon the ear as almost ugly, then the ear gets caught with

a certain bizarre charm, and the final effect is one of an odd stimulation. More immediately attractive, perhaps, is the brilliant elaboration of a Habanera in *La Soirée dans Grenade*; while another little *tour de force* is *Jardins sous la Pluie*, rain pattering and dripping steadily in a leafy garden, translated into music with a surprising truth.

Of a like nature are the pieces entitled collectively *Images*—the poetic *Cloches á travers les feuilles*, and *Et la lune descend sur la temple qui fut*. *Poissons d'or*, in the same series, one is tempted to regard as a joke. It is goldfish in a bowl, to the life, the ceaseless, flickering motion of tails and fins, the tireless evolutions, the quick, prismatic flash, as scaly sides catch the light. Mastery of description has led the composer, here, as in the glittering *Reflets dans l'eau*, to setting himself almost impossible tasks for the sheer pride of their accomplishment. These, and their like may be classified as Debussy's more contentious pianoforte compositions. He has, however, written others which have provoked less argument, as the charming *Suite Bergamasque*, and the *Arabesques*, while the *Hommage à Rameau* is but one of several compositions which would appear to

indicate an affection for the music of the past, a tenderness for the charm of tradition on the part of one who has, more resolutely than most, ignored its pretensions to a cramping and restraining authority.

SOME of the best—and worst—musical criticism has been written by composers. Its intrinsic merit apart, however, such criticism has always a value as so much self-revelation. It is more helpful towards an understanding of a composer as a creative artist, to know what he thinks about other people's music, than to know what he thinks about his own. As a rule a composer has little to say that is satisfactory, or even particularly intelligible, about his own music. All his ideas are in the music; they are there because it was impossible for them to become properly embodied elsewhere, and when the composer strives to express them anew in words, he stumbles and halts, oppressed by the angularity and insufficiency of speech. When he takes to the path of criticism, however, good, bad, or indifferent, his pronouncements become at once illuminative. Schumann, for instance, wrote criticism of all three kinds, but even his very mistakes, and he committed some rather astonishing critical lapses, help us to understand the kind of man he was, and how he looked upon music. Again, there

is something informing in Tschaikowsky's love of Mozart above all other composers, coupled with his admiration of Italian Opera. One seems to have hit upon a clue to much both in his character and in his music.

Debussy, also, has in his time played the critic. Like that of Tschaikowsky, his journalistic career appears to have been brief, but his articles in the *Gil Blas* and the *Revue Blanche* contain much which is not only characteristic, but also intrinsically valuable. "Bach exercises a sovereign influence on music, and in his goodness and might he has willed that we should ever gain fresh knowledge from the noble lessons he has left us, and thus his disinterested love is perpetuated." Having regard to the popular conception of the composer of the *Prélude à l'après midi d'un Faune*, this is not just exactly the kind of sentence one would have expected from him. It can, however, be paralleled by another quotation quite as remarkable. Speaking of what he conveniently styles the "arabesques" in John Sebastian Bach's compositions, he says: "The *primitifs* were mindful of this divine 'arabesque.' They found its origin in the Gregorian chant, and they supported its slender convolutions by means of strong

resisting counterpoint. When Bach returned to the use of the 'arabesque' he endowed it with greater elasticity and fluidity, and notwithstanding the severe discipline imposed on beauty by this great master, he gave it that free fantasy of reproductive movement which is still the wonder of our age."

With Wagner, and more particularly with his apparatus of *leit-motiv*, Debussy shows himself frankly bored. Speaking of the *Nibelung* Cycle, he says: "It is difficult for anyone who has not had the same experience to picture to themselves the condition of a man's mind, even the most normal, after attending the Tetralogy for four consecutive evenings. . . How insufferable these people in helmets and wild-beast skins become by the time the fourth evening comes round."

His Wagner criticisms are not all detraction, however: — "There are long moments of ennui when one does not really know which is most at fault; the music or the drama? Then suddenly the most supremely lovely music, irresistible as the sea, surges into one's ears and criticism flies to the winds." To some of his remarks on Beethoven's music, it seems impossible to avoid attaching a significance beyond

merely an opinion. More especially is this the case where he speaks of the Ninth Symphony, with the glory of its finale, and the "overflowing humanity, which poured across the traditional limits of the symphony." When he treats of the later phases of Beethoven's music, it seems possible to get near to Debussy's own artistic creed, and a prime article of that creed seems to be, that whatever else music is, it is not merely rhetoric.

SO in music there is nothing final nor absolute. There, as elsewhere, the law of change holds good, and new ideas are not only possible, but inevitable. Standards of taste are set up, but they are merely expedient, not infallible. They apply only to their own times, and neither disprove the past, nor lay commands upon the future. Thus Debussy is to be judged, not by his departure from laws which were devised to explain the works of those whom he has never tried to resemble; but by himself, and by his works, and their measure of truth to Nature; for in the sense peculiar to his art, the musician is no less bound by this essential Truth than any other artist. For the benefit of those to whom familiarity is an important credential of truth, and who are therefore disposed to call in question the truth of Debussy's art, simply because that art happens to be new to them, an anecdote, of which Turner may, or may not have been, but possibly was, the hero, may be recalled. A visitor to Turner's studio objected that he had never seen a sunset such as just then flamed from the easel. To which the painter all-sufficingly replied—"Don't you wish you could!"

A LIST

OF THE WORKS OF

CLAUDE DEBUSSY.

PIANO SOLO.

ARABESQUES, I. II. - - - - (Durand)
BALLADE - - - - - - (Fromont)
CHILDREN'S CORNER—Petite Suite - - (Durand)
DANSE - - - - - - (Fromont)
D'UN CAHIER D'ESQUISSES. - - - (Schott)
ESTAMPES—
Pagodes.
La Soirée dans Grenade. - (Durand)
Jardins sous la pluie.
IMAGES. SERIES I.—
Reflets dans l'eau.
Hommage à Rameau. - (Durand)
Mouvement.
IMAGES. SERIES II.—
Cloches à travers les feuilles.
Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut. (Durand)
Poissons d'or.
L'ISLE JOYEUSE - - - - - (Durand)
MASQUES - - - - - - (Durand)
MAZURKA - - - - - - (Fromont)
POUR LE PIANO.—
Prélude.
Sarabande. - - (Fromont)
Toccata.
RÊVERIE - - - - - - (Fromont)
SUITE BERGAMASQUE.—
Prélude.
Menuet.
Clair de Lune. - (Fromont)
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EN BATEAU (Transcribed from Petite Suite for Piano Duet.)
MENUET (Durand)
BALLET
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Transcriptions from *Pelléas et Mélisande.*—
Interludes.
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Les Cheveux.
La Mort de Pelléas.
ANDANTE, from String Quartet. - - - (Durand)
CORTÈGE ET AIR DE DANSE. (*L'Enfant Prodigue.*)
DANSE SACRÉE—DANSE PROFANE. Transcription of "Dances, for Piano, or Chromatic Harp, with Accompaniment for String Orchestra." - - - - (Durand)

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Pagodes. (*Estampes*, No. 1.) Transcription (Durand)

PELLEAS ET MELISANDE——

Transcriptions

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Les Cheveux.
La Mort de Pelléas } - - (Durand)

Petite Suite.—

En Bateau.
Cortège.
Menuet.
Ballet. } - - (Durand)

Prélude. (*L'Enfant Prodigue.*) Transcription - (Durand)

Printemps. Symphonic Suite. Transcription (Durand)

Quartet for Strings. Transcription - - (Durand)

Soirée dans Grenade. (*Estampes.* No. 2.) Transcription - - - - (Durand)

Le Roi Lear. Incidental Music. Transcription (Durand)

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TWO PIANOS (Four Hands).

Danses. Transcription - - - - (Durand)

Images——

Gigue triste.
Iberia.
Ronde } - - - (Durand)

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Il pleure dans mon cœur.
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Aquarelles.—1, Green. 2, Spleen.
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2e Symphonie en *la* mineur. Saint-Saëns - (Durand)

Ouverture du *Vaisseau-Fantôme*. Wagner - (Durand)

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(From a Debussy Programme of the *Cercle de l'Art Moderne*. Le Havre).

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